

POLICY BRIEF

The state of Washington's transportation system

By Charles Prestrud,
Director, Coles Center for Transportation

March 2025

Key Takeaways

1. In 2012 the total number of public-transit boardings was 220,697,247. By 2023 boardings had fallen to 164,925,647, a 24% drop.
2. Transit agency revenue in 2012 was \$2.1 billion. By 2023 it had ballooned to \$5.1 billion, an increase of 83% after inflation.
3. In 2012 operating cost per passenger on bus service was \$4.74. By 2023 it had risen to \$12.17, more than doubling after inflation.
4. The farebox recovery ratio for buses fell from 25% in 2012 to a mere 7% in 2023. The light rail farebox recovery ratio dropped from 25% to 13%.
5. Total annual service hours for Washington State Ferries (WSF) declined from 126,980 in 2012 to 105,456 in 2023, a 17% cut.
6. The number of WSF passenger trips declined from 22 million in 2012 to just 17 million in 2023, a decline of about 23%.
7. Meanwhile, WSF's cost-per-service-hour rose from \$1,810 in 2012 to \$2,679 in 2023, an increase of 11% after inflation.
8. The number of boats in service declined. In 2012 WSF had 19 boats in service. In 2023 it had only 17.
9. In 2012 there were 85.5 million daily vehicle miles traveled (VMT) on state highways.⁴ By 2023 that had increased to 96.3 million.
10. In 2020, there were 164 bridges managed by WSDOT in "poor" condition.⁸ By 2024, that number had increased to 229.
11. State records show 438 traffic fatalities in 2012, rising to 810 fatalities in 2023, an increase of 85%. This rise in traffic deaths is over five times higher than the state's 15% increase in population over the same period.
12. The percentage of fatal accidents that involved an impaired driver increased from 46% in 2014 to 51% in 2023.



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Introduction

During the past dozen years, the state's transportation policy has focused on increasing use of public transportation and alternatives to cars, rather than maintaining roads and bridges and increasing system capacity. Contrary to that emphasis, public transit ridership has declined while the number of miles traveled by Washington residents has increased.

Additionally, Washington's ferry system has seen a reduction in the number of boats and ridership, while expenses increased faster than inflation.

Finally, the number of traffic fatalities nearly doubled caused by several factors, including an increase in accidents due to impaired driving.

Here is a look at some key performance metrics for Washington's transportation system.

Public Transit - ridership down while spending went up

In 2012 the total number of public-transit boardings was 220,697,247. By 2023 boardings had fallen to 164,925,647, a 24% drop.¹

As the number of passengers and trips declined, the public money spent by transit agencies nearly doubled. Transit agency revenue in 2012 was \$2.1 billion. By 2023 it had ballooned to \$5.1 billion, an increase of 83% after inflation. In 2012 operating cost per passenger on bus service was \$4.74, by 2023 it had risen to \$12.17, more than doubling after inflation.

Over the same period public transit agencies became more reliant on tax revenue rather than fare collections. The farebox recovery ratio for buses fell from 25% in 2012 to a mere 7% in 2023. The light rail farebox recovery ratio dropped from 25% to 13%.

¹ The source for the following paragraphs is "Annual Summary Report of Public Transportation, 2022," M 3079.16, Washington state Department of Transportation, October 2023, <https://www.wsdot.wa.gov/publications/manuals/fulltext/M3079/spt.pdf>, and comparisons with Annual Summary Report of Public Transportation, 2012.

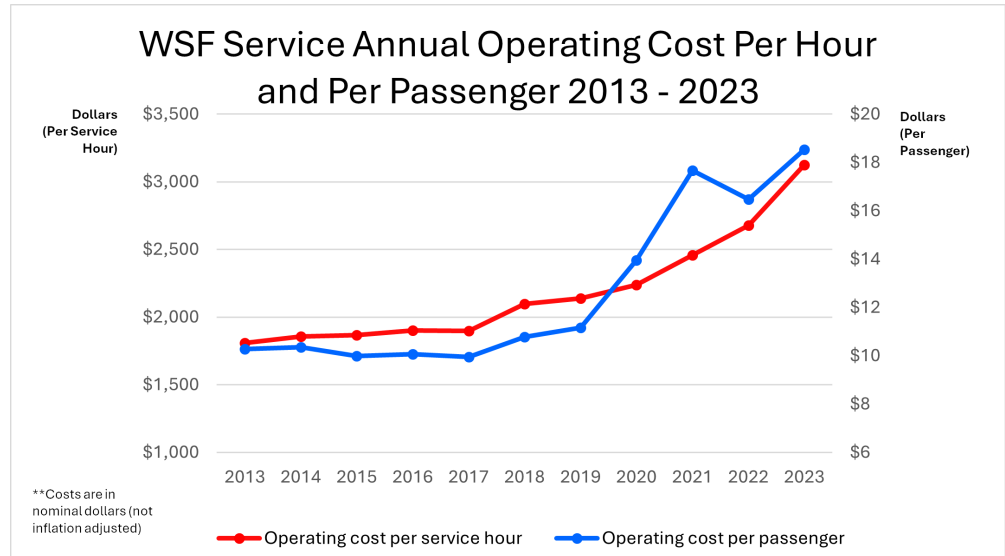
For WSDOT’s Amtrak Cascade’s rail service, ridership in 2024 rebounded back to pre-COVID levels, but on-time performance continues to suffer. In 2023 on-time performance worsened from 72% to 55%, far short of the 88% on-time goal.²

Decline in ferry service

While the region’s population has grown, the state’s ferry service for communities around Puget Sound and the San Juan Islands has deteriorated.³ Total annual service hours for Washington State Ferries (WSF) declined from 126,980 in 2012 to 105,456 in 2023, a 17% cut.

The number of passenger trips declined as well, from 22 million in 2012 to just 17 million in 2023, a decline of about 23%. Meanwhile, WSF’s cost-per-service-hour rose from \$1,810 in 2012 to \$2,679 in 2023, an increase of 11% after inflation.

While the need for efficient ferry service grew due to population increases and economic growth, the number of boats in service declined. In 2012 WSF had 19 boats in service. In 2023 it had only 17. The WSF fleet has an average age of just over 31 years, which makes the older boats susceptible to breakdowns, and a costly challenge to keep in service.



- 2 Amtrak Cascades: 2023 Performance Data Report,” Rail, Freight, and Ports Division, Washington Department of Transportation, March 2024, at <https://wsdot.wa.gov/sites/default/files/2024-03/2023-Amtrak-Cascades-Annual-Performance-Report.pdf>.
- 3 The source for the following paragraphs is “Annual Agency Profile – Washington State Ferries (NTD ID 00035)” for 2012 and 2022, Federal Transit Administration, U.S. Department of Transportation, at https://www.transit.dot.gov/sites/fta.dot.gov/files/transit_agency_profile_doc/2022/00035.pdf.

Delays in construction of new ferries

As part of his climate change agenda Governor Inslee issued Executive Order 18-01 in 2018 directing WSF to transition to a zero emissions fleet. This has resulted in years of delay in acquiring new ferries and also caused ongoing service reductions. The condition of the ferries Elwha and Hyak deteriorated to such an extent they were taken out of service even though no new boats were under construction to replace them. The WSF Long Range Plan adopted in 2019 called for adding seven new ferries by 2028, but it now appears that WSF will be lucky to add even one new ferry by then.

Miles traveled increased as road condition deteriorated

The daily vehicle miles traveled (VMT) on state highways increased by about 10% over the study period. In 2012 there were 85.5 million daily vehicle miles traveled on state highways.⁴ By 2023 that had increased to 96.3 million.

Over the same period the condition of state highways declined. The U.S. Bureau of Transportation Statistics ranks Washington state 43rd in the nation in the percentage of roads with an “acceptable” condition.⁵ In 2022, 71.92% of roads were considered “acceptable.” That is slightly higher than 2012, when only 69.23% were considered “acceptable.” As WSDOT Secretary Millar has noted, Washington’s highway system is “on a glide-path to failure.”⁶

The condition of bridges on state highways is similar. In 2012, 37.8% of state bridges were rated in good condition according to the U.S. Bureau of Transportation Statistics. By 2023, the share of bridges rated as good was very similar at 37.6%.⁷ According to the Washington State Department of Transportation, the number of bridges rated as “poor” has increased significantly over the past four years. In 2020, there were 164 bridges managed by WSDOT in “poor” condition.⁸ By 2024, that number had increased to 229.

4 <https://wsdot.wa.gov/sites/default/files/2024-10/public-roadway-vmt.xlsx>

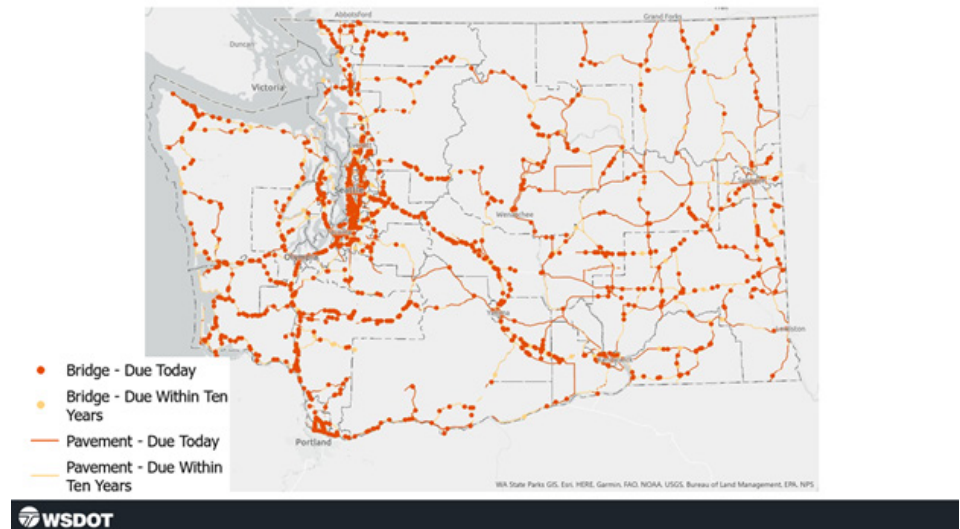
5 [Road Condition | Bureau of Transportation Statistics](#)

6 “WSDOT: Washington roads are on a ‘glide path to failure,’” by Chris Sullivan, KIRO News Radio, October 18, 2023, at <https://mynorthwest.com/3935707/wsdot-washington-roads-are-on-a-glide-path-to-failure/#/>.

7 [Bridge Condition | Bureau of Transportation Statistics](#)

8 [WSDOT - Gray Notebook Bridges - Conditions](#)

The map below shows how much maintenance and preservation work on the state highway system has been deferred or is overdue.



Rising traffic fatalities

Washington suffered a sharp increase in traffic fatalities during the study period. State records show 438 traffic fatalities in 2012, rising to 810 fatalities in 2023, an increase of 85%. This rise in traffic deaths is over five times higher than the state’s 15% increase in population over the same period.⁹

One contributing factor in the increased death rate is the increased incidents in DUI-related accidents, which often result in driver and passenger fatalities. The percentage of fatal accidents that involved an impaired driver increased from 46% in 2014 to 51% in 2023.

Given the current trend of increasing road-related deaths the state will almost certainly not reach a zero-traffic-deaths rate within the next six years, the goal set by the state’s Target Zero program.¹⁰

Transportation solutions

- **Focus on improving mobility rather than reducing daily travel.**
In 2008, the legislature established statewide targets for reducing per-capita vehicle miles traveled (VMT).¹¹ This policy is contrary to the goal

9 Fatalities from Crashes Involving a Motor Vehicle in Washington,” Fatalities Dashboard, Washington Traffic Safety Commission, May 2024, at <https://wtsc.wa.gov/dashboards/fatalities-dashboard/>.

10 “2022-23 Target Zero Action Plan,” Washington Traffic Safety Commission, November 28, 2022, at http://wtsc.wa.gov/wp-content/uploads/dlm_uploads/2022/11/WTSC_TZAP_FINAL_Nov-2022.pdf.

11 Revised Code of Washington 47.01.440 (2008), “Adoption of statewide goals to reduce per-capita vehicle miles traveled by 2050,” accessed October 20, 2023, at <https://apps.leg.wa.gov/rcw/default.aspx?cite=47.01.440>.

of providing more transportation choices to residents. Additionally, the original justification for VMT reductions – reducing CO2 emissions – is outdated with the increase in zero or low-emission vehicles. The only time the VMT reduction target was met was during the COVID pandemic of 2020-2021 when the governor ordered the closing of most businesses and told people to stay home.

After 16 years of failure, the legislature should repeal the state’s unenforceable and unachievable VMT reduction targets and instead increase system efficiency to provide faster travel times. Goals to reduce travel times can be implemented sooner, and do not involve imposing pain on the public by trying to arbitrarily reduce VMT. State leaders should adopt reasonable performance measures that emphasize energy efficiency and improving mobility for the traveling public.

- **Reform transit agency governance and improve accountability.**

In 2021, the 32 tax-funded transit agencies in Washington state had total revenues of over \$4.7 billion.¹² Most transit agencies are Public Transportation Benefit Areas, which are governed by boards of appointed members. As a result, residents may not have direct representation and have no say in who is appointed. Most people don’t even know who is supposed to be representing them. State leaders should revise transit board representation to increase accountability and monitor transit performance objectives in ways that serve the public interest.

- **Cut the cost of public road projects.**

One of the most significant obstacles to building roads and highways in Washington is the ever-rising cost of public projects. Over the years, lawmakers have added regulatory delay, political factors, and labor restrictions that increase costs far beyond what similar projects would cost in the private sector.

Artificial costs are imposed by government officials by choice. These are often based on political considerations, such as charging sales tax on state projects, apprenticeship requirements, inefficient permitting, environmental compliance, special set-asides for art, and using highway projects to fund mass transit. State leaders should revise the policies that add needless costs to highway projects so they can make better use of tax money and provide better transportation service.

- **Make funding for highway preservation and maintenance a higher priority than non-essential programs.**

Since 2012 the legislature has greatly increased state support for transit, bike lanes, electric vehicles, and other non-highway purposes. At the same time funding for basic highway preservation and maintenance has fallen so far short of identified needs that WSDOT now estimates an additional billion dollars per year is needed to return the system to a “state of good repair.” The legislature’s transportation budget should recognize their

12 “2021 Summary of Public Transportation,” M3079.15, Public Transportation Division, Washington state Department of Transportation (WSDOT), September 2022, at [2021 Summary of Public Transportation](#) (wa.gov).

responsibility to maintain the state's transportation assets, and to make that a top priority.

- **Allow carbon-emissions revenue to be used for fixing state highways and repairing culverts.**

The carbon-emissions fee enacted by the legislature is paid largely by motorists in the form of higher gas prices, but the legislature has not allowed that revenue to be used for repairing state highways. The state is also facing a multi-billion-dollar expenditure to comply with a court order to fix culverts that block the passage of fish. Paying for that large expense out of the transportation budget rather than carbon-emissions revenue has meant that high priority transportation projects have been postponed or remain unfunded.

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About the Author

Charles Prestrud is director of the Coles Transportation Center. Charles brings more than thirty years of transportation experience to the position, including serving as WSDOT's planning manager for King and Snohomish Counties, and earlier in his career, as planning manager for a transit agency. His professional work has included leading the preparation of a long-range transit plan, analysis of legislative proposals, development of State Highway HOV policy, crafting Federal and regional grant applications, and lots of inter-agency coordination (sometimes successfully). He has served on several Transportation Research Board committees as well as National Cooperative Highway Research Program study panels. Charles graduated from the U.W. where his studies focused on economics and geography. His favorite pastimes include reading economics journals, avoiding traffic jams, and boating when the weather is good..